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ABSTRACT

The "new realism" that distinguishes some recent childrens' books such as "The Mimosa Tree," "The Bear's House," and "My Daddy Is a Policeman" portrays the important issues of human life from a one dimensional perspective. These books focus on the tragedies and problems of life without answering the child's philosophical questions regarding existence or the meaning inherent in the events of life; they do not clarify the relationship between hope and hopelessness, or victory and defeat. While these books use hopelessness and defeat as single-edged themes, other recent books such as "Slake's Limbo," "The Dark Is Rising," and "The Missing Person's League," deal with the realistic themes of darkness, despair, and hopelessness at the same time that they stress the importance of the search for goodness and victory in life. It is this search and the human need for hope that gives literature its substance. (MAI)

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From Pandora's Box: Hopelessness and Defeat in Children's Literature

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From Pandora's Box: Hopelessness

and Defeat in Children's Literature

> --The box was wrenched from Pandora's grip as all evil issued forth into the world. We must give thanks that she was able to shut the box and to preserve hope for the future of all mankind.--

If an author's work is lasting and worthwhile literature, it should present to its readers not just a "slice of life" to be passively viewed, but an opportunity for the reader to become involved with the issues presented and to view the problems and their possible solutions from many different angles. Only thus will the author fulfill his obligation to enrich the reader's experience in such a way that he will be better equipped to deal with such issues in his or her own life. The current approach in children's literature is often "tell it like it is, the kids can take it! Give them a taste of the real world!" This approach is a major literary fault which must not be ignored by teachers, parents or librarians for it has resulted in the publication of many books pretending to deal with life while they actually ignore the real issues which complicate life. No, this is not a call for a return to didacticism, but for a plan for an in depth appraisal of books in order to determine whether the themes presented are treated honestly and thoroughly. Such a return to careful, honest, and thoughtful treatment of themes in writing for children is called for in "Rediscovering the Center in Children's Literature (Richardson 1978)."

Realism and the Child

According to the noted psychologist, Bruno Bettleheim (1976), the center of the young child's intellectual universe deals with such questions as: "Who am I? Where did I come from? How ought I to deal with life's problems? What must I become?" He also suggests that the child "wonders who or what projects him into adversity, and what can prevent this from happening to him . . . . Is there hope for him though he may have done wrong? . . . What will it mean for his future?" Good realistic fiction should be attuned to these cries of the human soul's questioning. Yet a perusal of representative works of new realism suggests that many authors do not believe as does Bettleheim (1976) that "Factual knowledge profits the total personality only when it is turned into 'Personal knowledge'." Instead they seem callously satisfied to take "literary polaroid shots" of human tragedies or problems and to treat them in shallow, negative and animistic ways dealing basically with the bizarre, the unhappy and the sensational. It is a sad truth that the marketing of such shock material is "in" and that it is quite profitable.

Hopelessness and Defeat

The shallow treatment new realism tends to give to the important issues of human life can be illustrated by examining the use of hopelessness and defeat as themes. Popularly, hopelessness and defeat are fates we deem deserved only by the wicked or dread enemies. In the real world, however, they are as universal as are hope and victory and, like all other fates, are respectors of no person, but are nondiscriminating happenings in life. Since children's literature is an integral part of the mainstream of all literature, it must explore all elements of the universal human condition no matter how

distasteful some may seem. It is precisely this universality of hopelessness and defeat in real life which demands that as themes in children's books they be treated honestly, thoughtfully, and meaningfully. Only such treatment will allow the child to clarify the relationship of hope-hopelessness and victory-defeat to events in his or her own life.

Thematic Duality

In the story of Pandora we learn that hope, defeat, victory, and hopelessness were all confined in a very small box. In fact, all of the elements of evil and of goodness co-existed within that small space. This notion seems, at first, paradoxical, even absurd, but upon reflection the story's logic becomes clear. It suggests that no individual element of darkness or of light may stand alone, that each is naturally, permanently, and vitally bound to an opposite. Victory must always share the battlefield with defeat. Hope must conquer, or be conquered by, hopelessness. Death snuffs out life but could not exist unless preceded by life. This duality of "hope-hopelessness" and "victory-defeat" is often a very visible part of real life. However, this duality is almost invisible in today's works of new realism where hopelessness and defeat are presented as single-edged themes that create depressing reading for our children.

Three "Literary-Polaroid Shots"

Three recent offerings in the field of new realism are The Mimosa Tree, The Bear's House and My Daddy is a Policeman. In these books the child is allowed very little room to explore the dual nature of hope and hopelessness. Instead the excitement of the sensational and the bizarre are presented in an impersonal, almost cold, photographic manner.

The Mimosa Tree (Cleaver 1970) concerns a poor family's hope that a move from North Carolina to Chicago will result in a better life. The book itself

is fascinating, for the reader sees one sensational incident after another--a mattress with blood from a murder, a boy trying to push his mother beneath a bus, and a boy dying from an epileptic fit. The book's fast moving style allows much violent and sympathy-provoking action. Its mood is so emotion-packed that the reader is filled with utter hopelessness as the Proffit family, after experiencing and failing at life in the slum, returns once again to North Carolina with a false vision of immediate better times. Standing on a street in Chicago watching them go is a young black boy wishing he could join them, wishing for just a glimmer of hope. How empty and hopeless the reader feels upon completion of this book!

Similarly, The Bear's House (Sachs 1971) shows the emotional deterioration of a nine-year-old girl until, finally, at the point when her baby sister lies dying with yellow pus oozing from her eyes, Fran's mind snaps and she enters into a fantasy world to "live forever" as Goldilocks in a boy Bear's house, a gift from an unknowing teacher. The Mimosa Tree and The Bear's House have been proclaimed by many as excellent works of realism and countless shouts of "tell it like it is" meet any criticisms directed toward them. If we are to give realism to children should it be that in which hopelessness is the basic theme?

The trend toward using hopelessness and defeat as single-edged themes is also found in picture books for even the youngest child. My Daddy is a Policeman, (Doll 1973) pictures a young child having breakfast with her father, going to the zoo with him and listening to him reading a story. Near the end of the book is the line, "I hope Daddy remembered to wear his raincoat." The facing photograph shows a rain wet pavement and a murdered policeman in a yellow slicker. The book concludes, "My Daddy was a policeman." What child are we going to ask to read this book? A policeman's child?

Hope and Victory

As one surveys the field of trade books for children, one wonders what defense can be put forth to justify the reality, or "realism embedded in fantasy," which the previously mentioned books contain. (At this point I refer the reader to "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" by C. S. Lewis (1963) in which Lewis warns us of misdirected "realistic" writings.) None of the three contains hope or victory. Each allows the reader to plunge, and with the protagonist no less, into total, and final, hopelessness and defeat. Hope seems such a tenuous thing. When no threat is apparent, it shines forth, bright and clear, easily within reach. Yet, as trouble begins hope becomes more docile, passive and obscure. It is hope's passiveness which causes authors trouble. Evil is active and aggressive, unknown and mysterious. It fights and stabs whether the protagonist is active or not. It can gnaw at one's spirit silently and continuously causing depression, hopelessness and defeat. Hope, however, is totally passive, activated only by a character's search and need of it. The authors of the three books discussed above didn't feel a need to activate hope. By choosing to ignore, or being unaware of, the bond of duality between hope and hopelessness, the authors allowed hope to lie dormant and obscured, thus forfeiting the battle to hopelessness and defeat.

Life's game is not forfeited, however, in the books of Holman, Cooper and Bonham. Instead their books show not only the aggressiveness of the elements of evil, but also the power of hope when activated by dire need. Slake's Limbo (Holman 1974)suggests utter hopelessness as Aremis Slake, feeling rejected by life, hides in the darkness of a subway tunnel. His only desire is to be away from people, and yet to exist. Very slowly Slake begins to find hope in a stranger's smile, in a purposeful job, in a

few extra potato chips at a restaurant, and in an unexpected get well card. Most readers, watching a young boy's meaningless life take shape, desire for him a full measure of hope and the ability for him not only to survive, but to live life fully and completely. Hope is evident as Slake leaves the hospital convinced that life will be on an upward trail, one he is willing to undertake.

The essence of hope is shown in The Dark is Rising (Cooper 1974), to be the soul of light, of goodness. Here, light is shown as the last breath of life which often allows another chance, but which, frighteningly, can be defeated by darkness if allowed to become too weak within the hearts and minds of too many people. Cooper, in fact, warns that the scales of equilibrium in the world often favor darkness and are precariously tilted toward disaster. She warns that only if we search for light, for goodness, for hope and victory, will we find them. Her stories are extremely powerful because of the sharp contrasting of the dark aggressiveness of evil with the brilliance of hope and victory. Cooper's protagonist, twelve year old Will Stanton, is constantly beseiged by trouble, and the reader is allowed to feel that during any one of the crises Will may be defeated, often because of his own decisions. The reader learns from Cooper of the universality of man's dual nature and that man's possession of free will means that life will be a continual battleground but that the individual is ultimately in control of his own destiny.

The Missing Person's League (Bonham 1976) illustrates how a small glimmer of hope lightens the threatening darkness of hopelessness. In this book pollution, totalitarianism, hunger, crime, all of the evils set loose from Pandora's box make the earth a very poor place to live. In fact, scientists predict that human life on earth will not be possible in a few

short years. The hope Bonham extends to the book's characters is suspended animation to allow human survival until the earth cleanses itself. A slim hope, yes, but something to cling to when all seems wrong and hopeless.

Not long ago Peggy Lee popularized a song called "Is That All There Is?" (Leiber and Stoller, 1969). In that song a young woman asks herself:

> "Is that all there is?
> Is that all there is?
> If that's all there is,
> My friend
> Then let's keep dancing.
> Break out the booze
> and have a ball."

Too many books being published for children today present this kind of haunting, hopeless despair. Yes, human problems, yearnings and pleasures are the "stuff" of life and of literature, but for an author's writing to be deemed good literature it must be appraised for its clarity and perception in presenting life's themes honestly, thoughtfully and meaningfully. It is not enough for a work of literature to provide diversion. To be worthy of the title "literature" an author's writing must clarify or enrich the reader's life. It must have substance! It must show hope.

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